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Espionage Case Highlights Risks Faced by Double Agents

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As his attorney sees it, there is no question of Richard Craig Smith's loyalty.

"Once you are an agent for the United States, you are always an agent," Brent Carver told reporters yesterday after his client, a former Army counterintelligence specialist, pleaded not guilty to espionage charges. "At no time did Mr. Smith do any act which would injure the security of the United States in any way."

Federal prosecutors believe otherwise. They have charged Smith, 40, of Bellevue, Wash., with disclosing the identities of six U.S. double agents to a Soviet KGB officer for \$11,000. If convicted, he could be sentenced to life in prison. A federal judge in Alexandria has set his trial for July 9.

Smith's case, according to former intelligence officials, illustrates the sensitivity of double-agent operations, a key part of the murky realm that is counterintelligence.

"You are never absolutely certain who the agent is really working for," said George Carver, a former deputy for national intelligence to two directors of the Central Intelligence Agency and now a senior fellow at Georgetown University's Center for Strategic and International Studies.

"There is no aspect of intelligence activity trickier or more fraught with security than double-agent operations."

In successful double-agent operations, which are undertaken by the military, the CIA and the FBI, an individual is working for both sides, a fact known only to the U.S. side. In general their purpose is to learn more about and deflect the attempts of hostile intelligence services to penetrate U.S. intelligence.

In the Army Intelligence and Security Command, where Smith worked for seven of his 13 years in the Army, the double agents are U.S. military personnel who pretend to be disloyal to the United States to cooperate with a hostile intelligence service, such as the

KGB, while secretly under the control of U.S. intelligence, according to court papers in the case. The double agents are used to learn the identities of KGB personnel, their intelligence structure and how they obtain U.S. military secrets, federal prosecutors have said.

The psychological stress on individuals involved in double-agent operations, intelligence experts and former intelligence officers say, is tremendous.

"The KGB is extremely sensitive to them [double-agent operations] and anyone targeted for recruitment by the KGB is very carefully scrutinized and tested by the KGB," said John Barron, an expert on Soviet clandestine operations and the author of two books about the KGB, the Soviet secret intelligence agency.

There have been some cases, Barron said, where the KGB, because of apprehension about double agents, has rejected Americans who actually wanted to work for them.

The person who engages in double-agent operations, intelligence experts and officials say, must also have unusual qualifications. Generally, the person must be emotionally stable, courageous and bright, but appear to have defects or motivations that would make him a believable recruit, Barron said.

"Any [single] agent is living a double existence," said Ken Bass, former counsel for intelligence policy in the Justice Department during the Carter administration. "A double agent is living a double, double existence, handling a lot of roles simultaneously."

Many of the double-agent operations are not run to collect information, known in the intelligence community as "positive intelligence," but to find out more about how the adversary's intelligence is functioning, former CIA deputy Carver said. Some also are used to supply so-called disinformation designed to mislead, he said.

The difficulties of a double agent involved in supplying disinformation become compounded because judgment calls must be made and clearances given to provide some valid intelligence information without seriously damaging our interests, he said.

"To build someone's credibility, so that what he reports tends to be believed, you have to give him some good information," Carver explained.

Smith, a staff sergeant, worked for the Arlington-based Army intelligence command from July 1973 to January 1980. He was the case officer or alternate case officer in charge of one double-agent operation known as "Royal Miter" from October 1976 to July 1978, according to the indictment against him. In 1977, three years before he left the government, Smith switched from military to civilian duty for the command as a GS-11 and was assigned to posts in San Francisco.

Informed sources said Smith's switch from military to civilian status indicates that he was highly regarded.

Federal prosecutors have charged that Smith, who had top secret security clearance because of his responsibility for the "Royal Miter" operation, had "access to and knowledge of" from 14 to 24 other double-agent operations and knew the identities of numerous U.S. intelligence personnel.

Besides the six double agents he is accused of revealing to the Soviets, he may have told the Soviets more than he claims, Assistant U.S. Attorney Joseph J. Aronica has said.

Authorities have declined to say how much damage to national security may have been done as a result of the alleged disclosures, but informed sources say that the Smith case has "shaken everyone up" in the intelligence community.

Information to be released to the Soviets through double agents is carefully coordinated and approved for release at the highest levels across agency lines, the sources said, so that what one double agent tells the other side does not inadvertently compromise another double agent who also is working for the United States, informed sources said.

Smith, who is being held on \$500,000 bond, appeared in court yesterday in a sports jacket and brown slacks. He is charged with

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